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SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AS COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE

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This is an account of four workers in the human services who have developed an ongoing collective experience. The four of us, all white, professional social workers, drew together in the late Spring, 1972. We were all involved in academic life, primarily as social work professors, although one of us was detaching himself from academic life at that time.

Our individual work experiences, when our group first formed, were characterized by strong feelings of isolation within our different settings. We were, each one of us, seen as essentially deviant - easily neutralized - without adequate confirmatory feedback - and in search of some sense of ongoing association with others.

Three of us knew each other from work in the People's Fund, an alternative community fund in Philadelphia, organized to raise money for grass roots community groups working for social change. The other man was relatively unknown to these three.

Our age range was from early thirties to the mid-century mark, with young, pre-school children or almost full-grown families on the other hand. Our history and recognition as academics and scholars ranged from a recently awarded doctorate to several decades of productive work. But our alienation and sense of incompleteness - together with some vision and hope for a more integrated and fulfilling experience, was a common and binding thread among all of us.

We define ourselves as radicals, and attempt to live out our beliefs in our teaching, writing, scholarship, community work and personal lives. However, the response to us from our academic colleagues, the Philadelphia social service community and the profession at large is not sustaining. Each of us has felt currents of support and identification from a broad ranging population. But this support had not yet and has not yet emerged into a coherent and mutually nurturing collective effort.

Two of us had discussed some sort of group, and this possibility was firmed up when all four of us found ourselves at a colloquium event at one of the schools of social work. We were ready, each from a different stance, to risk releasing ourselves from alienation and individuality at that point in time.

One of us, recently awarded his doctorate, beginning his first full time teaching position, and just ending a personal analysis, found himself with tremendous energies, but with limited channels of expression; with a political and scholarly analysis threatening to colleagues; and with a growing sense of the extent to which the society is not organized to encourage the wholeness and completeness in people.

Another of us was leaving professional work for a while, and had spent the past year doing photography work. He had felt the incredible contradictions of developing human services without being able to relate to clients' social

oppression, and was filled with the pain of his clear understanding of how the bureaucratic systems he was part of simply did not permit authentic or responsible relationships with his work mates.

The two others of us had both recently had collective experiences (time limited and imperfect, to be sure), either in the community or with students, which began to fan some hope for a way out of the fragmenting lives we lived.

When we came together and observed and experienced each other on that day, there was a sudden recognition that here were others, impatient with the same liberal reformist line, similarly out-spoken, and clearly experiencing the same kinds of dilemmas born of isolation and frustration.

At that moment of beginning we had only the most rudimentary sense of the issues that needed examination, the contradictions manifested in our lives, and the levels of sharing which would be opened up in our collective.

We began with a basic understanding that the individual and private nature of our practice was in basic contradiction to our theory, which spoke to the need for collective labor. We began with some hope that collective work might provide the conditions for integration of fragmented personal-political-scholarly and professional parts of our lives. We began with a collective and almost palpable sense of at last being in touch with others -- that here at last might be comrades who could provide trustworthy critical examination of our ideas and who might be counted on to feed back discongruities between theory and practice. Here, confrontations, authentic difference, common struggle and joint labor might take place.

In the beginning we came together from a base of limited but sharply defined awareness. The full range of concerns which would eventually be shared only emerged from our interaction over time -- from frequent clashes, conflicts, tenderness and contradictions - as we risked moving together into many areas previously reserved for discussion on a personal basis with one's mate, with other intimates, or with no one at all.

We began, appropriately enough, with presentation to one another of our written work and ideas, and with providing critical feedback to each other. As time went on and the level of understanding and trust grew, each of us began to broaden out and bring into the group those troubles which interfered with our productivity and happiness in many parts of our lives.

For each of us some major and meaningful events occurred in the collective. These had the consequence of helping each one of us to make connections otherwise not noted in our lives. The shared experience and analysis of these events helped us to integrate and make whole those elements and life processes artificially separated and opposed as a result of our experiences in hierarchical, bureaucratic, alienating working environments.

A sense of the journeys we took together and how they impacted on each of us in our collective can be gathered from some excerpts taken from discussions together in preparation for this paper.

A classic confrontation between professional success and the need to have one's work reflect core political beliefs:

"A lot of the work I've done feels like it goes off into the void. The uncertainty, the lack of feedback, the not knowing whether one is reaching like minded people. The professional audience doesn't receive my stuff because it's radical and the radical audience doesn't receive it because it's not couched in the conventional language of the left."

For another one of us, the need to bring one's work investment into balance and harmony with other life concerns:

"I was into a depression once for two or three weeks and when I came into the group I was able to share it. Part of it involved feeling a choice had to be made between achieving writing goals and meeting my needs for humanness and relatedness. I was experiencing a sense of distance and not being able to share my work side of myself with my wife."

For a third man among us it was making a break-through connection between personal life crisis and style of work:

"I clarified with the group the nature of my relationship with my wife and got support for my needs and priorities as a separate person. Although what I brought was personal I was also led to examine the work I did and how I did it. I found that my intensity and self-criticism was a blocking factor in my creative work as well as in my relationship with my wife."

And for yet another among us it was opening up shameful and despairing issues for group feedback - finding he could take it with comradely criticism, break out of his isolation, and break through to a new level of work:

"When I was able to tell about my daughter's suicide attempt, and get help with finding myself as a father, I could move and take care of things. Sharing this and other deeply felt concerns has somehow given me the confirmatory feedback so I can once again do professional writing that I value and respect, and in which I combine politics and practice."

The group was not always a unified and supportive system. We had many conflicts. Often our own interpersonal relations were the occasion for learning. They helped us understand the interplay of competition and trust within a comradely framework.

Two of us found, after a continuing struggle, that our competition about giving and taking from each other mirrored and rebounded on the way we were as men outside the group. On one occasion, really in-depth critical feedback of one man's writing was unacceptable because of his fear of letting another man go one-up on him.

A third member of our group quite clearly tended to down-grade and diminish himself. He took upon his own shoulders, personally and exclusively, responsibility for any difficult situations in which he found himself. When others of us could move from our need to compete with him, we were able to then give him room to put some of the burden on objective conditions and to give responsibility to others for how they responded to him.

The fourth member of our group, who had turned from the in-fighting of academia to photography, helped us see how our individualistic career strivings

were reflected in our group in competitive kinds of inter-personal processes among us.

Our collective became a place where we could share the despair we often felt as we came into the group bruised and somewhat demoralized from yet another inauthentic and lonely experience with our colleagues and sometimes with our students. We realized how hard we all found it to keep on struggling, finding ways to keep in communication with both friends and associates as our politics veered away so clearly from the liberal centrist consensus. As one man put it, "The group has given me a lot more fortitude to do battle with the shit at my university."

Each one of us in his own way could credit the group with providing certain crucial spurs to growth when moments of impasse in writing, or loss of belief in self, slowed productivity down.

Our discussions also centered, often, on our struggles with living partners. Two of us were divorced, but all of us were in essentially monogamous, deeply committed, long-term relationships.

As we moved deeper into such explorations, we experienced some important tensions in our collective. Apparently, the tender and fundamental needs touched by our processes demanded more commitment, more time and more involvement with each other's lives. We found ourselves unable or unwilling to make that commitment, at least at that time. The two hour session, every other week, was not sufficient for adequate resolution and satisfaction of needs aroused. Yet, we were not ready to commit ourselves to more.

After a few weeks of missed sessions and dissatisfactions, we very consciously assessed our group and its meaning for us. It was an important moment and a source of tremendous energy release as we found that each one of us experienced the collective as one of the central and necessary factors in his ongoing life. As one of us put it, "I don't know quite how we will work this out, but I know that I simply cannot let this group fail. I need it too badly in my life." Indeed, after several months of work focused more on political, scholarly and collective writing possibilities, we moved back into personal issues, with a clearer sense of the limits of our group and an enhanced capacity to maintain a consciousness of boundary points, while at the same time experiencing depth and feeling.

We discovered that we really needed, at the beginning of each session, to make space available and give permission for any of us who required it to present a need - a pain - and have it met as a precondition for other kinds of collective activity. Personal problems and task issues, we discovered, could not be separated. They had become one for us and had to be integrated, with different balances at different times, but always both present.

We were faced with the contradiction that we had placed work relations and personal relations over against each other rather than integrated with each other. By the seductive quality of having a group that we could trust, we leaned upon our personal needs and preoccupations and slipped away from professional work. This meant that we did not produce collectively to the same degree that we

shared the private parts of our lives. In the way that our regular work life caused us to disregard our human, personal needs (and the needs of our colleagues and compatriots), our collective efforts uplifted the personal at the expense of useful labor. Becoming aware of this contradiction, we resolved to overcome it -- and one step along that path was the composition of this paper.

Some of the glaring contradictions we have seen around this task can be listed. They include:

Our willingness to attend to each others' needs sometimes blocks out other kinds of work.

With limited time, we often do not give and take feedback on our writing as we would wish.

We are keenly aware of how much more we want from the group, how each achievement makes us greedy for new ones.

We are motivated to do important things, yet need to hold ourselves to realistic goals. In writing this paper, for example, we want to find and stimulate like-minded comrades, yet we want also to avoid glamorization and overstatement.

We find again differences among us in how we identify our group; for one of us it is a men's group, for others a professional group, for another a mix of that and political collective. We are thus reminded of our different strengths and needs and of how we must develop consciousness in order to integrate and struggle through these matters.

There are many options we haven't explored such as further friendships, developing ourselves as an action caucus, generating some major writing projects, expanding the group to include others or helping to start satellite groups, using ourselves to politicize professional organizations in the community, and generally becoming more visible and active outside of our regular four man session.

However, at this point in time, as we enter our second year, we have at least realized certain very satisfactory goals, ones which, perhaps, we had hoped for but not really known if we could reach. We have some very tangible products of our work. Each one of us has gathered strength and impetus to find energies and creativity. As of today we each have produced some really substantive professional writing or photographic work where a radical perspective on social work comes alive and manifest.

Our lives are still shot through with incredible fragmentation and contradictions; we could hardly expect otherwise. But we now have had through our collective a series of fulfilling, integrative experiences where we could live out, even for a brief while, the fullness and richness of a radical political analysis which is congruent with professional work and is deeply satisfying on a fundamental level of human need.

In talking together during our work sessions in getting this paper

together, we realized how deeply we valued our collective. Some of our statements reflect this:

"This has been my breakthrough into collective work -- and I can now move into collective labor with others in other contexts. I have overcome my sense of aloneness as prerequisite to effective work. I have been able to give up a central leadership experience and enjoy peer experience."

"The way I feel about this group is that if a major catastrophe were to occur in my life I would not need to feel alone and without support."

What do we draw from this in a larger context; why are we sharing our experiences and thoughts with you? Here are some meanings we have had in mind, some conceptualizations that underlie this effort.

We believe that we are typical of most persons working in social work and social welfare. The people we work with, speak with, connect with, hear and see all around us are very much where we are and where we have been. The isolation, self-doubt, idealism, frustration we express are common to us all because they are fostered and developed by the system in which we all live and labor. We think you are where we are, and we want to be more openly aware of that state.

We believe, for instance, that it is commonplace that social welfare workers must maintain a separation between their personal and professional lives; that there is unhappy opposition between the intellectual and emotional facets of daily work; that spontaneity and discipline stand opposed rather than integrated; that one cannot be political in professional activities and professional in political struggles; that most of us are condemned to private, individualistic career lines rather than collective fates. These are the conditions of life that accompany normal conditions of work in this society.

By creating our collective, we have been changing in a self-conscious way the conditions of our work. It is our experience that labor takes on new vitality under these revised patterns, even when that labor is fraught with the pains of undoing all the old ways. The process of work is made more human and, as a consequence, the products of our endeavors are enriched and humanized. We see big differences in the work we have turned out this past year, differences that affirm us in our developing working patterns, and we think others will find the same results.

In brief, as a kind of summary, we want to underscore in your minds and ours the necessity for each of us to integrate the political, personal, intellectual, professional, spontaneous, craftsman factors in our lives. The enrichment of each piece of living is the road to radical change of alienated existences and an inadequate society.

Note: This paper was first presented at the National Conference on Social Welfare, Atlantic City, New Jersey, 1973.